



LOOKING GOOD ON PAPER: Julia manages to scribble down a quick assessment of her latest date out of 29, while he moves off to prepare for the next round of speedy conversation

Ready for a whistle-stop amour...

Speed dating is the latest craze in the battle to end singledom and find true love. But can you meet your life partner in just three minutes? **Julia Horton** gives up a few seconds of her time to find out

"Hi," he said as he slipped into the seat opposite. "Hi," I replied. We smiled as our eyes met across the table – but the Mills and Boon moment was over almost before it began as his gaze suddenly travelled down to my chest and he leaned forward, with no attempt to hide the direction of his interest, squinting intently in the dimly lit room. "Sorry, what number are you?" Feeling like an order on a Chinese takeaway menu I gave my official number for the night. "Seventeen." (Apparently a popular choice among more discerning customers, but not good when left too long – may become cold.) I watched him record the information carefully on the card he was clutching, shielding it like a pupil in an exam lest anyone see what he'd written.

Eventually he looked up again. "I'm Adrian, number 22," he said. "Pardon? I can't hear you," I yelled over the

cacophony of people around us. "ADRIAN." "Oh, right. I'm Julia." Familiarities out of the way we moved on. "So, what do you like to do in your spare time?" he asked. Well, at least it got us talking, and, after a slightly rocky start, the conversation flowed – until a whistle trilled through the room, bringing everyone to an abrupt halt.

With a quick "bye" number 22 shuffled to the next table and number 23 took his place. "Hi." "Hi." Our eyes met across the table, before his... "And so it went on. Welcome to speed dating. The latest twist in our endless quest for love and happiness. In days gone by, the onus was on men to prove themselves worthy as bona fide knights in shining armour, slaying dragons and swimming the seven seas to win their lady's heart, while she languished in her castle, occasionally brushing her hair. Today, however, we are modern, equality is said to rule, and we just don't have time to wait for Mr Right to traipse to the ends of the earth any more. So we have created lots of new rituals, from internet sites to lonely hearts clubs, but of course they all

take much more time than busy modern people have to give. So now we've got Speed Dater and this new game saw me sitting in the Three Sisters in the faint hope that I might just meet someone interesting. Like all good games, it has instructions and rules. To play you need equal numbers of men and women, at least two of each and preferably all single and heterosexual. Warning: unsuitable for under 24s and over 36s – although if you're a man you can play until you're 39 – unless, of course, you like toy boys/girls, or sugar daddies/mummies.

You will need a row of numbered tables with girls on one side, boys on the other. The players wear stickers with their names and the number of their tables, and carry a pen and a scorecard on which to note down the names and numbers of their dates, ticking those they wish to see again. There is also space for comments. The game begins with each player chatting to their opposite number for three minutes, after which a whistle is blown, signalling that the man must move to his left and begin his next date. It continues until every man has "dated" every woman in the room. During the game, we are told, all players should treat each other with respect – so

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no yanking at the arm of his turquoise Hawaiian shirt and shrieking in Trinnie and Susannah fashion: "What were you thinking?" Players, like airplane passengers, are asked to switch off their mobiles lest they interfere with the vibes in the room. The general format of conversations is name, number, interests, jobs, but players are free to go off on any tangent they fancy.

However, under Speed Dating etiquette certain subjects are off limits. Players must not say: "So, how about it then?" Other no-nos include: "Are you going to tick me?", "I'll book the church for this Saturday" or: "You haven't a hope in hell."

Once you've decided what to talk about and start to get going, the nature of Speed Dating invariably spoils it. Delays are created by either party scribbling down the life story of their last date before the whistle blows. It seems like small talk, quick conversation is an art form.

Charmed, I'm sure.

It occurred to me that you could make better use of your three minutes by using the dating shorthand from newspaper ads, such as CSOH, W.T.M., and so on. Other Speed Daters had been advised by "well-intentioned" friends to adopt a clear strategy when chatting up the opposite sex. One chap, who shall remain anonymous, was told he had several options, all of which guaranteed success. These included pretending to have an amazing job as the girl will be so blown away she won't think of anything else (lying though is never a great way to begin a relationship); and agreeing with all her opinions as women are apparently suckered by a good listener.

My favourite (although I obviously would not advocate it) was The Magical Multiple Personality under which the man should take on a different persona with each new dating partner, keeping the basic information such as job and hobbies the same but behaving variously in an angry/sad/touchy-feely/paranoid manner. The idea is that during breaks women comparing notes will be unable to reach agreement on Mr Changeable and will become so intrigued that they all tick him out of curiosity. Is it any wonder so many

women are single while male strategists like that game around?

With 29 dates to get through, we were allowed a break every six or seven people, to get a drink, check on friends' progress or bolt for the door, but impressively no-one left as far as I could tell. The three minutes generally flashed by especially when I was unintentionally late back to my seat after one break. Sadly, by then my date had struck up a good relationship with the chair and I didn't stand a chance.

By the end of the night, my card was a muddle of random ticks and scribbled words bearing little relation to anything or anyone I could remember. Beside one guy's name I had just written: "guide dogs." Was that a subtle reminder to myself not to be seen dead with this person, I wondered? One girl had a more fail-safe approach to note-making, writing simply: "er, no" beside one would-be suitor's name.

Despite the risk of mass rejection – 29 "nos" in one night could crack even the strongest person – the atmosphere was good natured. I did however detect a hint of jealousy from the whistle-blower. Her requests for us to swap chairs pronto and make a back to our seats on time after breaks became increasingly like orders. With three dates to go she suddenly

announced game over. We were too slow. After the night itself, the speedy side of things tailed off. The organisers of Speed Dating pledge to send out e-mails to everyone within 48 hours of the event letting them know how many matches they have – or how many people they ticked who ticked them back. In my case it took about 72 hours thanks to a power cut and then a faulty computer.

Finally, however, I got into my e-mails and read my verdict. Of 26 dates, and around eight ticks I had three matches. So what now? With no more advice from Speed Dater on how to proceed from here I am hurtling into unknown territory.

Will I be able to talk for longer than three minutes on future dates? Will the sound of a whistle stop me mid-sentence as I rush off and try to engage some random stranger in intimate conversation? I don't know, but I'm about to find out...

● The next Speed Dater event is at the Three Sisters tonight at 7pm. Recommended ages are female 24 to 36, male 27 to 39. The price is £20 and to book tickets telephone 08702 430935, or check website www.speeddater.co.uk

QUICK FIRE: Julia and one of her 29 speed dates get to know each other a little better, with other couples engrossed in dates of their own